

Some Tips on Writing a Short Philosophy Paper:

I. The mechanics of writing:

Strive for clarity and precision, while not skimping on important details: (This will be your primary goal in writing. The rest of the tips on this hand-out are intended to help you reach this primary goal).

You should ask yourself: "does this sentence, paragraph, or paper, clearly communicate what I want it to?" You want to assume that your audience knows *nothing* about the subject matter you are writing on. Your job is to in effect teach your audience about the topic at hand. You should have clear examples illustrating your point (preferably your own examples). Make sure important points are sufficiently expanded upon. The view your summarizing should be "filled out", but not overly "bloated". It's not enough to convey to your audience that you have a general idea about what's going on. Students often say: "I pretty much understand this stuff, it's just hard for me to convey my knowledge in words!" But remember, the main goal in writing papers is to clearly communicate your ideas (as well as the ideas of the philosophers we're learning about) in writing. So, the clearer the paper, the higher the grade.

These are some comments that I'll often give to students who are struggling with their clarity. Try and avoid these!

How does this sentence fit into the rest of the paragraph?

This is awkwardly stated

It's not clear what you're trying to communicate

Huh???

Run spell check!

?

Don't use any quotations.

In longer papers, a few block quotes here and there when appropriate are ok. But in short papers, put everything in your own words. Take that block quote that you're tempted to use and boil it down to a few sentences that capture the main idea. Now of course, it goes without saying, if the *ideas* you presenting are not yours, you still must cite your work.

Avoid 'flowery' introductions.

"Since the dawn of time, many a man has embarked on the ultimate quest, the quest of finding answers to life's most magnificent and meaningful questions" (Gag)!

Related to this, avoid giving little historical backdrops on the philosophers and/or the ideas you'll be talking about, e.g. Descartes was born in blah, blah, blah; he attended blah blah university, where he blah, blah...

II. Doing the work of philosophy:

Generally a philosophy paper has two main parts: (1) a summary of the argument(s) you're asked to evaluate, and (2) your evaluation of those arguments.

Your summary:

When you summarize, often times you have to read carefully in order to follow the line of reasoning. Try to pick out the conclusion of the argument (what he/she wants you to ultimately believe), as well as the premises (the reasons that are given for why you should believe the conclusion). Doing this is, more time than not, quite difficult.

When trying to find the premises, look for premise indicators such as: *because, for, the reason is that, since, based on the fact that...*

When looking for the conclusion, look for conclusion indicators such as: *it follows that, thus, hence, therefore, so, we may infer that, consequently, this shows that, this proves that*, etc

Some arguments have more of these "indicators" than others; usually, the more indicators an argument has, the clearer it is.

Again, put the argument in your own words as best you can. Also, you want to make sure your summary of the argument is correct. When summarizing an argument, don't re-write it into something it's not by adding or taking away content. Try to avoid comments from me like: *"Isn't there more to the argument than this?" "Did Descartes say this?" "This is not Kant's argument"*, etc

Your critical evaluation (analysis):

Here is where we want to hear what you think. In your evaluation, there are a few options open to you -

a) You could clearly say why you think the argument is bad. Do this by picking out one or more of the premises and say *why* you think they are false (or, similarly, say *why* you think the author has not given enough evidence in support of one or more of his/her premises). You might think that one of the premises, or the conclusion, is just too counter-intuitive. If so, you can communicate how it so, and why we shouldn't accept it on that basis.

b) You could try and point out possible inconsistencies in the author's arguments. A group (2 or more) of statements are inconsistent when it's *impossible* for all of the statements be true. E.g., (1) At 3pm on 4/18/06, Tom is a bachelor; (2) At 3pm on 4/18/06, Tom picked up his wife from work. (1) and (2) both can't be true.

The idea here is that if you have shown that the premises of the argument you're evaluating are inconsistent, then you have shown that at least one of the premises is false.

c) You could say that the argument is good, and give your own reasons for *why* you think it's good.

d) Be modest in your evaluation. A good number of students think that they're smarter than the philosophers that they're critiquing (chances are that you're not), and they proceed to belittle them in their evaluations, usually through really bad arguments no less. Similarly, there's no reason not to take what you're evaluating seriously. Don't be dismissive of your philosophical opponent.

e) Don't just make groundless assertions! Give evidence for why we should believe what you're saying.

f) Don't put your objections in the form of a question. Students do this all the time. Unless the answer to your question is obvious (it usually isn't), chances are you need to answer your own question if your evaluation is going to have any substance. Otherwise, I'm left saying, "I don't know, you tell me"!

Good luck! By writing philosophy papers you are greatly exercising your capacity to write clearly and think critically. These are skills that you'll need no matter what your vocation.